



**AFRICAN AND CLASSICAL SECRECY AND DISCLOSURE:
THE KAGURU OF EAST AFRICA AND THE ANCIENT
GREEKS**

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For Nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has
anything been secret, but that it should come to light.
Mark 4:22

A mystery is good for nothing if it remains always a
mystery.
Lord Fawn in Anthony Trollope's *Phineas Finn*

Two topics unite the conference from which the essays here derive. One is the possible benefit of intellectual exchange between classical scholars and cultural anthropologists who have worked in Africa. The second is study of the mystery cults of the ancient Mediterranean classical world. The assumption that anthropology or sociology might contribute to classicist's understanding of ancient societies goes back to the mid-nineteenth century. During the decades when anthropology and sociology had their start, Greek and Latin classics were familiar to most scholars, and classical examples were frequently cited by early social scientists including Lewis Henry Morgan,

¹ I declined attending the actual conference at Emory University from which the essays for this symposium are taken. I have avoided flying after the terrorist attack in Manhattan in 2001, which I witnessed. I did, however, agree to contribute a paper to this volume.

Henry Maine, Numa Fustel de Coulanges, Marcel Mauss, Louis Gernet, Max Weber, Karl Marx and many others. The long history of these interdisciplinary ties is charted in numerous essays.² More recently some classicists, especially those from France and Britain, have drawn on anthropology to analyze their materials.³ Most interesting of all, a few classical scholars and anthropologists have shown continuities between ancient and contemporary Mediterranean societies, presenting relatively recent ethnographies to provide insights about everyday life which complement ancient studies.⁴ This is an approach that archaeologists have long found useful.

I am an anthropologist who worked in Africa but who has periodically shown acquaintance with classical Greek culture.⁵ I propose to write mainly about one African society but hope to indicate some of the ways that my approach might illuminate issues of interest to classicists. That illumination rests not on any substantive connections between my African materials and the classical world but on the ways my approach as an anthropologist might suggest useful analytical approaches for classicists. My African material does not directly relate to the stated theme of the conference, the mystery cults. This is a topic about which I know little. My material does relate to ideas and practices associated with secrecy and initiation and these topics do have considerable connection to the study of the mysteries.

I begin with a brief descriptive, ethnographic account of secrecy among the Kaguru of East Africa. I then briefly consider some features of secrecy in classical Greece, taking examples from Homeric times to classical Athens. I do this because I assume that there is a general ethos of Greek culture that remains strikingly similar in some respects over

² The following essays are representative examples of this long and at times difficult exchange: [Dodds 1951](#), [Finley 1974](#), [Humphreys 1978](#), [Kluckhohn 1961](#), [Lloyd 1978, 1979](#), [Loraux 2000](#), [Marett 1966](#), [Redfield 1991](#). More pertinent to my essay are the book by my former teacher, the great sociologist Alvin Gouldner (1969) and my subsequent essay inspired by this (1989).

³ For example, [Gouldner 1979](#), [Beidelman 1989](#).

⁴ See [Campbell 1964](#), [Finley 1963](#), [Pitt-Rivers 1977](#), [Walcot 1970](#).

⁵ My own interest in classics, especially ancient Greece, was promoted by my being an Africanist. The famous Nigerian Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka, proposed parallels between the thinking of certain African societies and ancient Greece (see [Soyinka 1976](#), cf. [Armstrong 1976](#), [Bishop 1999](#), [Senanu 1980](#)). As he noted, societies that display beliefs in oracles, polytheism, divination, divine kings, slavery and ritual drama offer many parallels for consideration.

time and place. I conclude by suggesting how an anthropological approach may illuminate materials from classical Greece.

The Kaguru

The Kaguru are a matrilineal, Bantu language-speaking people living in east-central Tanzania, east Africa. When I did my fieldwork (1957-66) they numbered about one hundred thousand. They lived in small villages centered around matrilineal kin groups, where cooperation and conformity were needed to ensure survival in a world of poverty and frequent famine. Since I have elsewhere published extensively on Kaguru life and culture, I do not here provide more background.⁶

In the introduction to his brilliant sociological analysis of secrecy, Simmel points out that all societies are constituted around interpersonal relations which are gauged by the information social actors construct about persons.⁷ This information is crucial for Kaguru, whose everyday lives center on innumerable interactions between kin and neighbors. Such relations depend on both the information one discloses about oneself and others, but also upon what is concealed or what is divulged against a person's wishes. As Simmel repeatedly notes, what is secret and hidden is the other side of what is revealed, willingly or otherwise. For Kaguru, then, management of such personal information is essential to their affairs. Indeed, it is essential to the construction and maintenance of social personhood itself, a personhood produced by what one's actions and appearances disclose about oneself.⁸

Kaguru have secrets, information that they do not want known about themselves. They also know that things that cannot be readily spoken or openly acknowledged, things they treat as secret even though in fact most of these things are known to many. In some ways these unvoiced but known matters are far more important than are those things truly hidden and unknown. Sometimes it is even difficult to distinguish clearly between what is secret and what is only unspoken or unshown. Besides the secrets of self, those of individual people, there are secrets that define membership in groups, for example, the knowledge that empowers elders and the ignorance that defines the young as irresponsible and weak. Likewise, there are things thought to separate

⁶ see bibliographies [Beidelman 1971](#), 198, [1997](#).

⁷ [Simmel 1950](#): 307.

⁸ see [Mauss 1979](#), [Allen 1985](#), [Beidelman 1997](#):10.

men from women, things men or women supposedly cannot readily know or fully grasp about their different but complementary natures. In all these cases, what young and old and men and women know and do not know is less clear-cut than first appears. Most Kaguru know more than they may publicly acknowledge.⁹

The critical areas of Kaguru secrecy relate to those ways that Kaguru are problematically linked to one another, to the ways that these social ties produce tension and ambiguity due to the conflicts between competing demands in allegiances and motives. These ties center around sexuality and the kinship and affinity which stem from it. Marriage produces kin groups which control and consume resources, especially food, and which provide the means and rules for exerting force, even violence. Ultimately control of sexuality and control of resources (land and labor) amount to the same thing, since social ties provide avenues to resources and resources in turn facilitate extending and supporting kinship and other social relationships... or threaten them as people compete and quarrel over goods.

Traditional Kaguru social relations center around kinship and marriage. These relations may seem obvious, but Kaguru veil the particulars of kinship and sexuality in a kind of secrecy. For example, Kaguru rarely use traditional personal names (often derived from the dead) in public address, and they don't always address one another in terms of their most obvious kin relations. To do so would specify or prioritize some relations that in many ways are more valuable when kept sufficiently vague to allow a fluid range of alternate choices in commitment. Such vagary may also be seen as polite because it prevents exclusion of the far larger number of neighbors and kin who are less close. For example, more people are called "parent," "sibling," and "offspring" than are actually one's immediate kin. Close relations are, of course, not actually secret but are often treated as best not clearly indicated in everyday speech. For example, Kaguru refer to kin mainly in

⁹ In the most famous of all African novels, *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe describes the secret *egwugwu* masquerades of the Ibo of Nigeria where the ancestral spirits appear in villages while hidden under masks and rushes. He relates that the women and children who are said to be terrified of these figures may sometimes recognize local village men beneath the disguises. Even so, they never acknowledge that they know. When an ancestral mask is torn off by a no-longer-believing Christian convert, everyone works to conceal the revelation. The Ibo have to work to maintain a secret that is actually known (Achebe 1962: 77-83, 164-179).

terms of their father's clan but almost never mention their own (their mother's) matrilineal clan, even though such ties are often said to be primary. Mentioning one's matrilineal kin ties is sometimes seen as blatant and unseemly reference to a person's sexuality, for one's clan affiliation is at the heart of rules about marriage and incest. Therefore, such affiliations are mentioned when necessary but more often glossed by more general kin terms. Furthermore, matri-clan relations are unquestionable, whereas ties to fathers and collateral kin are negotiated in terms of varying payments of bridewealth and claims to residency.

A few examples illustrate how Kaguru conceal their social sexuality and kinship. When in public one should never acknowledge the existence of one's sexuality in the presence of parents or siblings, kin whose sexuality poses particularly intense problems in competing loyalties within close kin groups. References to sexuality are thought to undermine the authority and solidarity essential within matrilineage. No references to sex are made before parents, including one's parent's beds or certain body parts. The conventional way for a parent to disown a child is to speak publicly about his or her own sexuality to the child, thereby proclaiming that they are no longer related, so that such symbolic incest taboos are no longer relevant. The unspoken is spoken. Similar restrictions in speech exist between affines, even though it is obvious that what links groups of affines is the fact that two of their kin are married to one another and therefore must be having sexual relations. This was strikingly demonstrated to me at a Kaguru beer party. I saw one man speak to another and then be assaulted by him. When I asked a bystander what had happened, I was told that the speaker had been struck because he called the other man "brother-in-law" or "affine." I remarked that they were indeed brothers-in-law and so I wondered why this should be wrong. The fight had taken place because the man should have called the other "brother" or "kinsman". To use the affinal term was tantamount to announcing that "I fuck your sister," which abused the man who was confronted incestuously with his own sister's sexuality. The sexuality of such a woman is a matter of profound sensitivity to both men: one man depends on his sister for his matrilineal heirs, while the other, as a husband, produces those heirs. Moreover he wants to set the loyalty of both the offspring and the mother (his wife) over their loyalty to the uncle, the sister's brother and matrilineal elder. Both men have deep but conflicting interests in the same woman's sexuality even though one is banned from uttering any word or action suggesting sex and therefore

incest (witchcraft). Such conflicts over authority and loyalty preoccupy Kaguru, but should not be openly spoken.¹⁰

Another example of the Kaguru regard for personal sexuality as something to be concealed comes from a court hearing in which a woman was seeking divorce from her husband. Frustrated, she finally began proclaiming a litany of sexual inadequacies on the part of her husband, amid the gasps and guffaws of the male spectators and officials. Earlier it was not clear that the court would grant the woman a divorce. Now the contested divorce was quickly granted, with the acknowledgment that no man could live with a woman who had so shamed him in front of others. Among Kaguru general bawdiness is considered fun, but not public and explicit disclosure about others' personal sexuality. Such matters should remain unspoken and secret.

Kaguru consider that one's material resources should remain secret. It is true that at the public payment of bridewealth the amounts involved are announced on the part of the two families, in the one case to show proudly how much they can provide for a kinsman to marry, and in the other to show proudly how much their woman is worth. Yet this involves only the wealth they are willing to acknowledge and involves the pooled resources of many households of kin. The actual wealth of any one person or any one household is never made clear. The resources of any particular household are matters of the utmost secrecy. For such reasons, no outsider Kaguru is allowed close to the food storage areas within any house and no outsider should allude to this or to how much food may be there. (It is also in the food storage area or under beds where personal wealth is hidden.) Nor should one ask anyone how much livestock he or she possesses and livestock are often secretly loaned out to various kin and friends so as to conceal one's actual holdings. Nor should one openly number another's children or even point at them. For related reasons, Kaguru nearly always consume their meals in public. Unless they are very ill, Kaguru eat sitting outside their houses, often joining their neighbors to eat, men with other men, women with other women and children. To eat indoors is to imply hoarding food and an unwillingness to share or worse, that one is eating forbidden food such as human flesh (one is a witch). What resources one actually possesses may be a secret, but Kaguru repeatedly try to give the impression that they

¹⁰ See [Beidelman 1956](#): Chapters 10 and 11. Kaguru secretiveness about biological facts is surpassed by the Chagga, also of Tanzania, who traditionally deny that adult men defecate ([Moore 1976](#)) and take pains to conceal this.

would not withhold food from hungry neighbors during times of hardship, even though, of course, this must be done. Kaguru folklore is filled with allusion to concerns and fears centered around selfish kin and neighbors unwilling to share resources, especially food, during times of need.¹¹ This secrecy around food reflects the anxieties held among people who are supposed to share as good kin and neighbors yet who acknowledge legitimate self-interest on the part of those who need to look out for themselves and those closest to them if they are to survive during difficult times. These are realities that go against the ethos of kin and neighborly solidarity and sharing.

The exchange of information and the display of social personhood are neatly illustrated by the Kaguru view of social space. The bush, the wild uncultivated area far from settlements, is associated with libidinous, selfish, anti-social desires and activities, with witchcraft, adultery, with the dangerous dead, and with magic and medicines. It is a sphere of power and disorder. The interior of Kaguru dwellings is also associated with much that is hidden such as one's actual wealth, one's real sexuality and any other secrets. The primary areas of Kaguru social life are the open space at the center of any settlement and the area in front of the door into a house. In these places people sit and visit, where ceremonies such as marriages and funerals are arranged and where rites of passage are feasted and danced. These are the public stages on which Kaguru act out their public pictures of their personhoods, where they present what they want their neighbors to see them to be. The village square and the front doorway area are the antitheses of the hidden spheres of the outlying wilderness and the hidden interior home, areas dangerous with hidden and secret possibilities.

The most secret areas of Kaguru life are both profoundly hidden and yet subjects of constant gossip and innuendo. These often involve witchcraft and sorcery. All Kaguru believe that some if not all others are capable of using supernatural powers to harm one. While Kaguru sometimes say that the reasons for this are inexplicable, they credit such evil and secret activities mainly to anti-social motives such as jealousy, envy, greed and spite. Consequently, Kaguru try to hide much about themselves so that others are not hostile to them. This is the ill-will felt because some enjoy benefits that others do not, whether this be food, wealth, health, children, sexual favors or political power. Of course, these condemned, forbidden negative feelings are actually felt at some

¹¹ Beidelman 1986: chapters 10 and 11, 1997: 83.

time by every Kaguru who consequently also fears these same feelings in others. Kaguru witches are described as inversions of all that makes Kaguru proper social beings. Witches are said to lack all constraint in their sexual desires and to have voracious appetites for food.¹² In short, witches are like wild beasts. Their activities are secret, occurring often at night and in the bush where witches consort with wild animals. Suspicions of witchcraft are rife among Kaguru, but they are only rarely mentioned publicly except by innuendo. In addition to witchcraft, some Kaguru are thought to possess special knowledge and powers of magic, sorcery and supernatural foresight (divination).¹³ Such powers are always thought to be secret in that those lacking such powers do not know exactly what such powers are or how they may be acquired and used. Some say that such powers are inherited in the blood; others associate them with unnatural familiarity with wild animals. Others say that such powers are acquired by deep familiarity with things of the wilderness. Still others say that such powers are learned from ethnic outsiders hostile to Kaguru. It is acknowledged that such powers may be used to combat witchcraft though they may also relate to witchcraft itself and therefore are so dangerous that people should avoid speaking openly about them, either for fear that this will label them as too knowledgeable, dangerous and untrustworthy or that such speech will bring on the ill will of those who do possess such powers.

The sources of life and death are secret for Kaguru. Pregnancy and birth are dangerous topics which cannot be discussed freely. Children in particular are shielded from mention of pregnancy and birth, and newborn children are mentioned publicly only in a guarded way.¹⁴ The dead are only guardedly mentioned. The dead and newborn are closely connected since the dead are the source of the newborn and often jealously take them back from the living, especially if the living speak too much or too enthusiastically about the newborn or if the living forget to propitiate the dead by naming newborn after them. The newly dead are born into the land of the dead and the newborn die from the land of the dead and arrive in the world of the living. One of the first rules of etiquette I was taught by the Kaguru was not to mention the newborn or the newly dead. Their names and presence were secreted from strangers and from supernaturally vulnerable young people, and though the

¹² see [Beidelman 1986](#): Chapters 9 and 11.

¹³ [Beidelman 1997](#):87.

¹⁴ cf. [Beidelman 1997](#): 92.

newborn might have names of dead kin (among their multiple names), such names were not freely spoken.

Kaguru believe that men and women are defined by their very different experiences and understandings. This is confirmed by the fact that Kaguru men and women do have different social goals. Their advantages and weaknesses are defined by their different positions within matrilineal kinship, polygynous households and other social rules and configurations. Kaguru men and women experience different social worlds in that they share meals apart, often sit separately at social gatherings and rituals, and often toil apart in different work parties doing different kinds of tasks. Above all, their very natures are described as profoundly different. Kaguru men are defined as socially orderly and restrained and therefore more fit for public debate and conducting ceremonies. In contrast, women are defined as more emotional and disorderly in both acts and speech, as associated with the wilderness and bush and contaminated by menstruation and therefore fit for more confined domestic and informal activities. Women are even associated with the destructive and uncontrollable yet tasty aspects of wild pigs, men being hunters and wild women their prey.¹⁵ Yet it is also through matrilineality, through women, that Kaguru men are primarily grounded in their claims to land and the voices of the dead who are buried in that land. These matrilineal ties, like motherhood itself, are profound and non-negotiable, not required to be frequently voiced in public, whereas paternity is arbitrated by public payments and adjudication. These powerful differences are underscored by initiation at puberty whereby Kaguru children, defined as socially irresponsible, ignorant minors, are transformed into jurally responsible, marriageable adults (men and women) supposedly now eligible to be given the secret social knowledge of adults.

Kaguru practice both male and female initiation of adolescents. At each set of ceremonies members of the opposite sex are rigorously excluded. Kaguru boys are secluded in the bush and taught ethnic tradition, history, sexual behavior and other lore by elder men.¹⁶ Kaguru

¹⁵ See [Beidelman 1997](#): see also comparable material on the Kaguru's matrilineal neighbors, the Ngulu ([Beidelman 1964](#)). I mention this cultural feature because it uncannily parallels Athenian beliefs about women and pigs in the rituals of Thesmophoria, a topic I discuss later; cf. [Golden 1988](#).

¹⁶ Nietzsche rightly observed that moral and cosmological beliefs are best taught combined with strong associations with sexuality and the emotions, a point

girls are secluded inside houses and taught such lore by elder women. Much of the ritual involves pain and harassment by which, Kaguru believe, adolescents better learn. Initiates therefore earn their knowledge through privation and suffering.¹⁷ The replication of Kaguru legend, history and oral literature reinforces the authority of the elders and maintains the continuity of Kaguru culture.¹⁸ The initiates are taught songs, riddles and legends, many relating to how men and women should or should not interact with one another. Sometimes arcane language is used, though more often concepts are expressed through the imagery of everyday life which is given new and dramatic significance as these words and symbols are unpacked with new, previously hidden meanings.¹⁹

Much of this instruction is very bawdy, expressing matters in ways that Kaguru would never ordinarily speak. Each group is instructed as though the knowledge and rituals they are taught are unknown to the other gender. Yet when I interviewed Kaguru men and women, separately, each group related nearly the same songs, rituals and other information. The initiates are sworn to secrecy, warned especially not to divulge ritual secrets to outsiders and uninitiated young people. Of course, all adult Kaguru know such information and Kaguru ethnic identity is largely defined and glorified by this common body of lore and rituals.

Kaguru say that adolescent initiation is the most important and guarded feature of their culture. Yet even the uninitiated know many aspects of Kaguru symbolic and ritual life. Young people are exposed to some of this by the songs and rituals that initiating Kaguru display outside the initiation houses and at the public celebrations held in the centers of Kaguru villages when the initiates are welcomed home as adults.

Kaguru young people begin the process of learning about sexuality and adulthood early on. As children they are told riddles, songs and stories by elders at night around the hearth. These often contain the

confirmed by ethnographic research and by instances from classical Greek literature (though rejected by Plato (cf. O'Flaherty 1978).

¹⁷ cf. Schilder 1950; Morinis 1985.

¹⁸ cf. Rieff 1970:170.

¹⁹ Beidelman 1997 8, Chapter 7; cf. Precourt 1975; Niederer 1990. The unpacking of meaning in words and gestures resembles the unpacking of meaning in psychoanalysis and has similar powerful implications for initiates' awareness (Rieff 1979 79)

same symbols later elaborated upon at initiation. In this way the young learn how to think analytically about Kaguru social life and customs,²⁰ even though they are forbidden from asking adults to explain or elaborate on these often opaque stories and lore. Many of these stories contain subversive and critical insights into Kaguru social life, insights that are seen as best not openly expressed but essential to be known. Kaguru children know much about sexuality and given the close quarters of Kaguru village life, with its constant gossip, and the children's everyday tasks of tending domestic animals, they know much about interpersonal conflict and suspicion and the nature of sexuality and the body. Yet however much scattered information children may glean about sexuality and other adult activities and feelings, they are forbidden from discussing such matters or asking questions until initiation. In a way, such knowledge is secret because it is unexplained and unspoken, and children are defined as minors because they have no right to speak of such things whether they know something about them or not. Initiation confers the right to ask and speak about such matters but then in ways modulated by the etiquette and rules only adults are thought (or hoped) to apply. Initiation is therefore not just about learning secrets but learning how to speak and act about them. Such restraint may not always work, but it makes more sense with adults than children because children cannot be held jurally responsible for their actions or speech in the way that adults may be, since adults may be subject to fines and other serious punishments not visited on children.

In addition to the traditional advantages conferred by age and gender, today some Kaguru hold advantages over others on account of their acquisition of modern knowledge learned through literacy and contact with town, commerce, school and government. Kaguru consider such knowledge a resource to be exploited and guarded much like that knowledge traditionally held by elders. Despite a national government which now urges the educated to share knowledge with others, such information is often fetishized and secreted by many elite,²¹ much as traditional knowledge is protected by elders, and men and women still claim to withhold their sexual secrets from one another.

I have so far only briefly mentioned how secret, hidden knowledge is sometimes revealed during insult and verbal abuse. Yet there is one category of Kaguru who may legitimately voice that which

²⁰ see [Beidelman 1963, 1979, 1986, 1997](#), cf. [Beuchat 1965](#).

²¹ cf. [Bledsoe and Pobey 1986](#).

ordinarily should not be spoken or acted or gestured. These are Kaguru whom anthropologists describe as “joking relations.”²² These may be Kaguru from clans who own clan-lands adjoining one another, or Kaguru who are children of one’s father’s sisters and children of one’s mother’s brothers.²³ All such persons stand in ambivalent, even somewhat hostile relations. The owning clans may run into conflict over claims to territory. The cousins I mentioned are those who most strongly contend one’s rights of inheritance. Your mother’s brothers’ children contest your own matrilineal claims against those whom they make as their father’s children. (Your mother’s brother is their father.) Your father’s sisters’ children contest your claims as a father’s child against their own claims as matrilineal heirs. (Your father is their mother’s brother). Kaguru explain that such kin are inevitable competitors or even enemies because of these conflicts over allegiance and inheritance. Such “joking kin” can speak negatively about relatives in ways that others may not, and may safely expose themselves to negative supernatural forces avoided by a dead person’s matrilineal relatives. They may barge into private situations and may seize property or damage goods without incurring punishment. In short, they can speak about matters that are usually secret or unspoken and enter spaces and seize property that are ordinarily sequestered. For example, such joking kin take charge of burials and funerals, situations of considerable ritual pollution and supernatural danger. They are the major speakers at funerals where disputed inheritance is discussed and where suspicious deaths from possible witchcraft may be examined in terms of who would gain from such a death. These joking kin are not inhibited by the usual concerns about maintaining harmony within a matrilineage. They are free, even obliged, to speak out about unspoken grudges, unfulfilled obligations, disloyalty and suspected witchcraft. Ordinary kin would not dare. Joking kin are allowed, even sometimes required, to be transgressive troublemakers. They cross the boundaries of sexuality, death and property that problematize yet define much social life.

The Ancient Greeks.

Classical Greek culture and society have certain enduring features from Homeric to Athenian times, a few so enduring that some

²² see [Beidelman 1986](#): Chapter 8.

²³ cf. [Beidelman 1966, 1985](#): 127-134.

characteristics found in contemporary Greeks (and other Mediterranean) societies seem hold-overs from long ago.²⁴ Most prominent of these features are intense concern about personal and family honor and shame, concern about gender and gender separation, and conspicuous, competitive public display of status, often in order to defeat or denigrate the claims of those whose status is nearest to one's own. As Nietzsche long ago observed, classical Greeks formed a "contest society,"²⁵ what I describe as an "agonistic society."²⁶ Greek culture, like many others in the Mediterranean world, revolved around a set of insoluble quandaries. One quandary is that its members are intensely competitive in terms of achieving and maintaining personal and kin prestige, yet are able to earn such prestige only from those of their competitors least willing to concede this, those nearest them in status. Furthermore, to maintain such honor they must constantly put it at public risk. As a result Greeks are intent to conceal damaging information about themselves while they are keen to learn such information about those against whom they compete. All men who aspire to high status must assert their standing in the public arena, a scene of intense struggle and risk for status. For these complex, interrelated reasons Greeks, especially older males, are preoccupied with control, revelation and concealment of information about themselves and those closely tied to them, such as offspring and women. The Homeric literature neatly illustrates this. The Homeric world, while reflecting ideas and a way of life no longer wholly pursued in classical Athens, was "the womb of everything Hellenic."²⁷ It provided a "recital of tribal identity" comparable to the hoary traditions repeatedly invoked at initiations by Kaguru.²⁸ Even Plato's attacks on Homer derive from Plato's recognition of Homer's power as a "servant of convention" who provided a core of social education.²⁹ Indeed, it was Homer's powerful attachment of emotions to morality that Nietzsche praised and which disturbed Plato.³⁰

Here are two brief examples of revelation and secrecy from the Homeric material. The aristocratic warriors in the *Iliad* must recite their

²⁴ Pitt-Rivers 197: 1-17, 71-112; Walcot 1970: 57-119; Campbell 1964: 78-102; Williams 1993: 220-221

²⁵ 1959: 35-38; cf. Gouldner 1965: 11-13, 41-132

²⁶ Beidelman 1989.

²⁷ Nietzsche 1959: 33.

²⁸ Havelock 1963: 119, 152

²⁹ For Homer in Plato's discussions of education, see *Republic* 377d-401d; 599a-601a; Bloom 1968: 426-436.

³⁰ Helm 1976: 22-23

status, honors and pedigree before combat to ensure that they are risking their honor only against opponents of comparable or greater merit. Hector's slaughter of Patroklos, deceptively clad in Achilles' armor, generates a complex sequence of emotional problems over honor complicated by the conflated identities requiring both reidentification and revenge. In the *Odyssey*, clever Odysseus, so often willing to lie and deceive, feels compelled to divulge his real name to the Cyclops whom he has bested, even though this creates further dangers for him from Cyclops' divine kin, Poseidon. Odysseus must disclose his previously concealed identity if he is to gain any prestige from defeating the Cyclops because an anonymous and unproclaimed victory would not count.³¹

Another quandary posed in classic Greek society involves the terms of gender. Male domination was intensely associated with male honor and the perpetuation of the patrifamily, which ultimately depended on women, on both their honor and virtue and on their mysterious fertility. Greek women were ordinarily excluded from many arenas of civic life, yet their adherence to the system was vital to making it work. Repeatedly women asserted their own value and importance, voiced criticism of their subordination, and at times threatened to subvert the system, most prominently in periodic civic rituals such as Thesmophoria and Dionysian festivals (real and imagined). Women's complex, subordinate yet essential roles were manifest in myth and drama and most powerfully of all in the rituals associated with fertility as associated with Demeter and to a lesser extent with other goddesses. While the Greek Greater Mystery cult at Eleusis has received considerable attention, it cannot be properly understood outside its relation to the "Lesser Mysteries" and associated drama and myth. In some of these rituals the ceremonies were often dominated or even exclusively celebrated by women.

This quandary over gender was manifest especially in the ways personhood was defined by the roles and rights of men and women. Classical Athens provided numerous examples of the ways such personhood was asserted and contested. The public ceremonies of the city allowed the city to demonstrate its solidarity but also allowed competing individuals and their families to assert their status. Sponsorship of games, ceremonies, buildings and feasting allowed ambitious and proud aristocratic men to shine in public. Such contended

³¹ [Beidelman 1989](#).

forms of honor were not seen as disruptive, because they were grounded in civic benefit. Such honors for having provided public good had to be put at constant competitive risk to be sustained. Parallel to this public arena of civic life, every aristocratic house held an area where men could dine and drink and compete in hospitality and wit. Yet a house also held a secluded area where women were secreted, a place where female honor and shame were guarded against those outside. A house thus contained both a solid semi-public male space and a private female space concealing personal realities and complex domestic affairs. The contrast and interplay between male public honor and status and the messy realities of the hidden domestic and personal lives of women and men provided powerful contrasting themes for Greek literature, especially classical tragedy and comedy. Aristophanes' *Wasps* sharply illuminates these tensions between the public square and the domestic household,³² while his *Ladies' Day* illuminates the clash of gender interests and the parallels between Demetrian and Dionysian civic rituals that allowed for limited female transgression where women said and did what was otherwise forbidden or unspeakable.³³ Comedies and tragedies often centered on the problematical situation of women who in some ways stood outside of public life but whose occasional ritual obligations or emotions drove them into public view. In ordinary civic life the necessary rectitude of women preserved household honor, but the theater and some other civic rituals disclosed the tensions of gender where women no longer supported the men but instead subverted male authority and dignity. Yet ultimately Greek male domination and order were reasserted by uniting conflicting groups through making references to the threat of ethnic outsiders. We should recall the complex gamut of allusions to gender, ethnicity and animality publicly displayed on the Parthenon friezes proclaiming such fissions and fusions of identities for all to see.

Greek women were an especially powerful critical element in the orchestration of public speech and silence. Pericles' famous funeral address recommended that Athenian women remain reticent, even in mourning their heroic dead. Yet it was Greek women who traditionally portrayed the honorable memory of their dead men. Later Athenian leaders seeking civic solidarity tried to muffle this extravagant mourning by the women, as it seemed to threaten the male solidarity of civic life as

³² Crane 1997.

³³ Broderick 1997

well as provide a means for aristocratic households to out-do one another. Despite men's attempts at curbing women, secreting them from public view and silencing their proclamations of self, some of the most prominent and dramatic of Attic public ceremonies involved women, sometimes even to the exclusion of men, who were not allowed to witness all that the women did. Women's powerful and ambivalent roles were embodied in their prominent roles in both weddings and funerals, which were often symbolically conflated.³⁴ These were especially concentrated in the symbolic role of Persephone (Kore) whose marriage to Hades (ruler of death) was also tied to her relation to fertility and wealth (Hades was also named Plouton, wealth).³⁵ Weddings and funerals were associated with unveiling and veiling, disclosure and concealment, much as women were associated with both.³⁶ Greek women were therefore powerfully problematical and pivotal; they were not, as Detienne argues, "marginal."³⁷

These forms of liminality, of roles and activities embodying problematized moral behavior, lay at the heart of much classical Greek thinking and feeling about secrecy and the dramatic and dangerous possibilities of disclosure. This liminality took many forms: that which could not be readily spoken or that which could be spoken or done only on ritual occasions involving obscenity, role-transgression and reversal, and the blurring of social boundaries. These arenas included the Mystery cults, but also the broader range of associated activities including theater, civic rituals and festivals. Not surprisingly, common themes connecting all these were women in general, the compromised or threatened gender of men who were challenged by these women, and the rituals and activities associated with birth and death (Demeter, the mother, and Persephone, the maiden). Women also at times figured in prophecy and spirit possession and oracles (by Dionysos and by Apollo), and less directly in the problem associated with maintaining or breaking social or cosmological boundaries (often facilitated by Hermes or Dionysos).

Goddesses, especially Demeter (the Grain-Mother), Persephone (the Maiden or Kore) and Athena (the Virgin revealer of skills), figured prominently in the myths and rituals sometimes associated with concealment and secrecy. Yet the liminality of gender was reflected in

³⁴ Rehm 1994; Loraux 1998: 15-28; Blundell 1995: 162.

³⁵ Nilsson 1961: 24-26

³⁶ Rehm 1994.

³⁷ Detienne 1986: 131.

some male figures as well. Two stand out as especially suggestive. Hermes epitomized Greek notions of liminality. He was a patron of merchants, traders, heralds, messengers, craftsmen and thieves. More important, he was the mediator between the spheres of the living and that of the dead, associated with weddings and funerals, and his obscene half-form with an erect phallus, the herm, marked important boundaries. In many ways his position resembled that of the joking-kin among the Kaguru. His cleverness and deception were tied to both his role as keeper of secrets but also as mediator of information, including both desired information (crafts) and that which was more problematical (secrets and both phallic obscenity and restraint).³⁸ Kermode and Partridge both aptly remark on the English words *hermeneutics*, *hermetic*, and *hermit* being derived from complex attributes of concealment and disclosure associated with this Greek divinity. It is Hermes too who helped facilitate Persephone's return to Demeter, so important to the mysteries, and which served to conflate death and rebirth, funerals and weddings.³⁹

Greek prophets and diviners were often male. In the case of Tiresias and some other seers the ability to know and disclose secrets was related to problematic sexual knowledge and identity, an almost hermaphroditic spanning of boundaries revealing the deep connection for Greeks (and this pertains to many African cultures as well, including the Kaguru) between gender, sexuality and power.⁴⁰

The Greater Mysteries centered around Eleusis and ceremonially linked that city with Athens; it was part of a far wider complex of ritual and ceremonies.⁴¹ The rituals in turn sometimes related to festival occasions inspired by Dionysos and thus had roots common to the classic theater. Theater and masking, problematic and transgressive role-playing, Dionysiac features, extended civic awareness into a broader arena where things ordinarily socially forbidden and concealed were repeatedly manifested. Dionysos' festivals were connected to the theater but also to drunkenness, undisciplined emotion and violent expression. Dionysos was a stranger, revered yet not entirely Greek, a liminal divinity who was

³⁸ Brown 1990: 12-18, 22-27, 33-34; Rhode 1925: 542; Rosen 1991: 113, 120-121, 125; Kerényi 1986 Winkler 1990.

³⁹ I have long been struck by the uncanny parallels between Hermes and the West African Yoruba divinity Eshu-Elegba, patron of markets, deceit, divination and mischief.

⁴⁰ Delcourt 1961: 36-43; Loraux 1995: 211-226.

⁴¹ cf. Kerényi 1967; Burkert 1987; Mylonos 1961; Simon 1982: 17-37; Nilsson 1961: 42-64; Parke 1977: 55-72; Beard 1989: 114-119.

even associated with ambiguous male sexual behavior and with women (maenads) behaving aggressively like men, ferociously like animals in the wilderness, behavior secreted from men who should avoid maenads at their own peril.⁴² The Athenian dramatic stage itself was part of a segregated arena of masking, Dionysiac behavior, masks both concealing and revealing identities, portraying the unreal or a form of superior reality, not ordinarily considered bearable or fit to be witnessed, behavior expressing what ordinarily was secret and unrevealed.⁴³

Respectable women who were excluded from much of public, civic affairs enjoyed access to many festivals and indeed dominated or exclusively controlled some.⁴⁴ At such rites women often indulged in expressive acts, speech and drunkenness not otherwise ever allowed in public. These women transgressed and destabilized boundaries between genders. In such behavior an aggressive, subversive side of women ordinarily hidden was revealed and flaunted.⁴⁵

Most striking in such rites and even in some theatrical tragedy and comedy was the presence of obscenity, the exposure of what should ordinarily be hidden – unspoken, not done and not seen. Such obscenity displayed crucial transgressive sexual associations tied closely to Greek concern with fertility and an assertion of life's overwhelming continuity and strength. The Greater Mysteries at Eleusis were linked to the Lesser Mysteries held in Athens somewhat earlier in the year. The Thesmophoria, or Lesser Mysteries, emphasized obscene female speech and actions and the fierce exclusion of all men. At these festivities obscene dolls were fashioned in the shapes of male and female genitals and were associated with sexual aggression. Women were often associated with piglets related to obscenity as well as fertility.⁴⁶ These themes emphasized women's undisputed power as mothers, as unfathomable (secret) fertile beings whose capacities to provide men with offspring gave them a power and dangerousness that challenged men's public order.⁴⁷

⁴² Detienne 1989.

⁴³ Cassidy 1991; Goldhill 1987: 75-76; Kraemer 1979: 77-78; Peirce 1993: 237, 259-260; Segal 1978; Seaford 1981: 257; 1993: 121-125; Schleier 1993: 90; 1995: 124-125, 135; Simon 1983: 32-33; Clay 1982; Detienne 1986: 77-78; 1989; Nilsson 1969: 62-63; 1964: 91, 108-109.

⁴⁴ Johansen 1975

⁴⁵ Versnel 1992; Carson 1990: 135-137; Simms 1998: 122

⁴⁶ Olender 1990; Golden 1988; Detienne 1986; Keuls 1985: 349-379, 353-357.

⁴⁷ Foley 1994: 112-118; Kraemer 1979: 57

The cult of Demeter was central to both the Greater and Lesser Mysteries. All these ceremonies referred to a myth in which obscenity played a pivotal role. The goddess Demeter (the Mother) was mourning and distraught because she had been deprived of her daughter Persephone (Kore, the maiden) who had been kidnapped into the subterranean sphere of death where she was later wed to its god, Hades. Beside herself, Demeter had angrily endangered all life on earth by cutting off the spring and its fertile bounty. Lost in gloom, she sat disconsolate until she was distracted and moved to life-affirming laughter by the verbal sexual obscenity of her attendant Iambe and by the gestural sexual obscenity of her attendant Baubo. These servants said, did and showed what ordinarily should not be said, done or shown. Laughter provided the vital empowering tonic to Demeter who then took new heart to regain her daughter from Hades (with Hermes as the concerned gods' emissary).⁴⁸ With the Maiden returned, Demeter restored fertility to the earth. Before Demeter arranged her daughter's "rebirth" from death's realm, she had been frustrated when she tried to manage a rebirth of a mortal, Demophoon, into immortality in repayment to her mortal protectress at Eleusis, the boy's mother. (The ignorant interference of the boy's mother prevented this). This lesser incident in the myth parallels the later rebirth of Persephone and further underscores the myth's pervasive theme of life's transitions and the conflation of death and fertility. Before she laughed, Demeter had resembled a Dionysian maenad thrown into a spasm of masculine violence and wildness hostile to what was life-giving and creative.⁴⁹ Like actions in some Greek theater, such obscenity revealed what could not otherwise be shown or said.⁵⁰ Such obscenity made secret and disturbing features about feeling and the body no longer hidden and secret but "doorless" (*athyra*) in that obscenity transgressed conventional boundaries. Such breaking of boundaries was often the special Dionysian domain of women. Like the divinities Demeter and Persephone (and like Kaguru joking-kin), such sexual medial figures linked the hidden world of the dead and fertility with the world of the living using blatant exposure of unnerving realities of sexuality and violence. Like the transitions of marriage and death, both profound and sometimes violent, as with

⁴⁸ cf. [Henderson 1975](#): 2-8, 13-18; [Olender 1990](#); [Zeitlin 1981](#); 1982; [Winkler 1990](#): 193-194, 205-208; [Foley 1994](#): 65-97; [Golden 1988](#); [Parke 1977](#): 82-88; [Detienne 1986](#).

⁴⁹ [Schleier 1993](#): 103.

⁵⁰ cf. [Clay 1982](#): 281-296.

Persephone, the Mysteries involved both veiling (concealment) and unveiling (disclosure) of what under other circumstances would be hidden or revealed. It is in this sense that Redfield has viewed Greek marriage as more than a *rite de passage*; for him it is a central Greek symbolic cosmological encapsulation of profound domains of generative power.⁵¹ It also played on Greek women's associations with the concealing yet yielding fertile earth.⁵²

The Eleusinian Mysteries were the most famous and prominent of a wide range of Greek rituals and festivals involving mystery and secrecy but also with implication of fertility and conceptual transformations.⁵³ These were said to be secret since those who had been initiated were forbidden to discuss what had occurred, even with fellow initiates. Yet we know that the general features of the rites were not difficult to learn, being open to both men and women and even to slaves and non-Greeks so that at any time thousands of adults in Greece and even elsewhere had been initiated and therefore must have known them.⁵⁴ Rohde was right to observe long ago that there was no real secret.⁵⁵ We know that the Mysteries involved many of the symbols and ideas common to other festivals associated with Demeter and her daughter. We also know that the Eleusinian Mysteries were tied to ancient legends and that the site of the shrine at Eleusis incorporated sacred space embodied in rocks and caves which had long been revered even before the Mysteries, presumably on account of powers associated with the earth itself.⁵⁶ Such ideas must have been more basic than any mystery. The first parts of the Eleusinian Mysteries were open to the view of everyone along the processional route and near the shrine. Demeter and Persephone were the main revered figures, and their significance was well known to all Greeks. Many of the rites must already have been familiar to everyone, since they resembled the popular civic festival of Thesmophoria; pigs were sacrificed, and obscenity, abuse and joking often surrounded the celebrants.⁵⁷ All of the themes of Eleusis therefore

⁵¹ Redfield 1990:115.

⁵² Loraux 2000: 83-94

⁵³ Rahner's long study associating these and other Greek beliefs and practices to Christianity is grotesquely misconceived but fascinating (1971).

⁵⁴ Rohde 1925: 221-222; Blundell 1995:161; Parke 1977: 55-72; Mylonos 1961: 224

⁵⁵ Rohde 1925: 222.

⁵⁶ Dietrich 1986: 35, 70.

⁵⁷ Mylonos 1961: 201, 256; Henderson 1975: 16.

resonated in myriad Greek experience. In later times some masculinization of the festival was attempted by also featuring Triptolemos, a male favorite of Demeter credited with giving men the art of cultivating grain and believed by some to be one of the judges of the dead. Yet Triptolemos' role in the cult never surpasses the formidable power of its female figures, Demeter and Persephone, and therefore this seems a weak accretion to the myth and rituals.

We know then that the Mysteries were not to be spoken about (*arrheta*, close-mouthed), though this hardly means that they were ineffable, as Burkert claims.⁵⁸ The word mystery itself derives from muster (close-mouthed).⁵⁹ We know that a few Greeks were actually prosecuted for insulting the Mysteries, but this seems to refer to parodying the rites, not actually revealing what surely was common knowledge.⁶⁰ Referring to such taboos, Bremmer cites Strabo (10.30) who described some sacred matters as secret because they are too holy to be brought into the open.⁶¹ As social theory this is unhelpful. In fact, Strabo argued that secrecy itself is what induces a sense of reverence, for the divine eludes perception by the senses. I know of no way that the sacred can be fathomed except through the senses, but mystification of that fact is typical of the religious obfuscation that characterizes most belief in the supernatural. As William Robertson Smith wrote over a century ago, religious concepts must be “wrapped in the husk of a material embodiment” and “a ritual must also remain materialistic, even if its materialism is disguised under the cloak of mysticism.”⁶² Strabo's view of matters seems to parallel that of the Kaguru: what is secret and sacred is not readily spoken, but it may be well-known. Otherwise such injunctions would not be necessary. Something is not hidden because it is a mystery, but rather not speaking of something mystifies it.

⁵⁸ Bremmer 1995: 72-28; Burkert 1985: 228-229, 240-246, 276-277, 285-286; 1987: 7-8, 69, 90-91.

⁵⁹ Partridge 1958: 423-424.

⁶⁰ Martin 1987: 60-61.

⁶¹ Bremmer 1987: 60-61.

⁶² Smith 1894: 437, 439

Conclusions

The idea of secrecy relates to what is hidden, to what is separated from everyday life.⁶³ Yet secrets are myriad in their meanings and significance, so that generalizations about them are tricky.⁶⁴

Secrets are inevitable in all social relations: they are products of complex social interactions and strategies. Without holding secrets and yet also without gaining knowledge of them, people will find social affairs become difficult to manage.⁶⁵ The fact that secrets are concealed leads to the fact that they almost always are eventually disclosed.⁶⁶ To know of a secret is usually to feel a need to learn it. Yet revealing information need not put an end to a sense of mystery or even secrecy. Kermode has shown how reticence and concealment often enhance the force of narrative, and the seeming impenetrability of texts may generate a seductive aura.⁶⁷ In the case of many religious rites and symbols, the very act of concealment and the associated ado convey a sense of power and excitement. Indeed, obfuscation often seems an integral part of many secreted materials (this is especially the case with religious exegesis).⁶⁸ Yet disclosure often simply reveals more levels of concealment.⁶⁹ The archaic language of some religious material, especially secret knowledge, adds to its hiddenness and mystery.⁷⁰ Finally, secrecy can create solidarity among those who share it, as well as exclusion of those unfit to know it, or at the least unfit to show publicly that they know it. It can also provide a sense of social continuity by strongly asserting that social memory is sufficiently sequestered that it is protected and secluded from tampering.⁷¹ It can even be employed as a social resource by a person or group whereby claims to superior merit or power may be made.⁷²

Following the lead of Mauss, Bellman provides one of the best recent accounts of secrecy for an African society and repeatedly shows

⁶³ Partridge 1958: 600.

⁶⁴ Goffman 1959: 141-143

⁶⁵ Bonanich 1976

⁶⁶ Simmel 1950: 329-334; Bok 1982: 16; Nedelman 1993: 3-6, 11-12

⁶⁷ Kermode 1988: 155-156.

⁶⁸ Bole 1987: 3. It is probably this that make many religious scholars' accounts of secrets of little value (Wolfson 1999)

⁶⁹ Kelber 1988: 1; Moore 1976: 368.

⁷⁰ Brandt 1980.

⁷¹ Kelber 1988: 5-7.

⁷² Luhmann 1989: 146

that the secret is defined not by its content but by the social procedures by which it is concealed or revealed.⁷³ Except for Middleton's helpful study (1987), Bellman's work (1981, 1984) is the only really detailed African ethnographic account of secrets.

I draw several points from this comparative exercise. First, true secrets may well exist, but many notions (if not most) that are termed "secret" are actually unspoken but commonly known, especially in the case of earlier societies. Second, social activities, whether they are rituals or customary, everyday behavior, make sense only in terms of broader social beliefs, values, and activities. They are what Mauss termed "total social phenomena." The meanings of symbols and acts make sense in terms of their relations to a wide range of ordinary habits.⁷⁴ One example of such exegesis in recent classical studies illustrates this approach. Pierce tries to consider sacrifice (*thysia*) in all its complex meanings by reviewing all the contexts of its use.⁷⁵ In the case of the Mysteries, what are sometimes presented as special and dramatic situations are actually not as extraordinary as some assert. Indeed, if they were not embedded in the symbols and experiences of everyday life, they would not have the appeal and force that they command. It is in a narration and analysis of the underlying themes in everyday affairs, in the quotidian, and the tensions and problems embodied in them, that we are most likely to find the keys to understanding these more dramatic concerns. Teasing out these underlying cultural features of a society will illuminate these seemingly more special and prominent occasions.

The African Kaguru and the ancient Greeks appear as far apart socially, culturally and historically as any two societies. Yet repeatedly they reveal some striking similarities of concern and cultural themes. Secrecy, gender and the irreconcilable tensions of social life as they are found in dividing households set in communities also emphasizing unity have much in common wherever they are found. The Eleusinian Mysteries may have changed over the centuries. Yet the various cults and festivals tied to gender, fertility, marriage and death, and the tensions between households and communities involved with all of these social practices, form common threads which united all the phases of society in which the Mysteries were held. This is because such cults and festivals were so deeply concerned with kinship and domesticity, the sectors of

⁷³ Bellman 1984: 16-17, 144; cf. Urban 1998: 210.

⁷⁴ Mauss 1979: 10; Wittgenstein n.d. 3; Nieder 1990.

⁷⁵ Pierce 1993.

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social life which all along provide the glue for such societies' survival. In this, at least, the African and earlier Greek materials illuminate one another.

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⁷⁶ In the case of the Greek material I have cited a wide range of publications to indicate that the issues I mention have been of wide and long concern to scholars. This does not signify my agreement with the sources. For example, I find little to praise in the works of Detienne, Loraux, Burkert and Keuls.

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